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ABSTRACT

This study focused on innercity elementary school staff perceptions of the process they engaged in, which emerged from the principal's initiative to move the school culture in a more collaborative direction and thus further develop pedagogical practice and student social and academic growth. Research in this case study involved observations and semi-structured interviews with all staff members at one school. Researchers completed interviews twice during the 1997-1998 school year. The interviews emphasized perceived changes that were being implemented at the school as a result of government, district, and school initiatives, particularly those initiatives initiated by the teachers and principal themselves. Six findings have emerged from this ongoing study to date: (1) devolution of decision making power to the school site, (2) leadership style of the principal, (3) role of personal friendships in work-focused groups, (4) administrative support for teacher professional development, (5) need for the staff to develop a shared vision statement, and (6) variety of social and academic learning opportunities being provided to students. Contains 19 references. (SM)

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# Case Study of the Development of a Collaborative Teaching Culture in an Inner City Elementary School

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**Case Study of the Development of a Collaborative Teaching Culture in an Inner City Elementary School**

In a review of the "school effects" literature, Bossert (1988) asserted that:

> . . . one key "effect" always is associated with the charter of our public schools: to provide children with the opportunities to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. . . . Comparisons of effective and ineffective schools have begun to identify specific school-level factors that promote higher student achievements, particularly in the basic skills. (pp. 341, 345)

In Alberta, the recent province-wide "Site-based management" initiative devolving considerable decision making power to individual schools is based on assertions similar to that made by Bossert. In many Alberta school jurisdictions, various individuals (e.g., superintendents, trustees, business representatives, parents, teachers) have issued challenges to school staffs to work closely together to improve their schools. Acheson and Gall (1997), da Costa (1993), da Costa and Riordan (1997), Grimmett and Erickson (1988), Hargreaves (1994), and Oberg (1989) believed that when teachers actively collaborate on pedagogically related issues, they would reflect more on the methods and content of their daily instruction. This reflection, it is assumed, would lead to improvements in classroom teaching and, consequently, student learning.

Two objectives were served by this study, namely to: (a) further develop theory regarding how principals and their staffs can work together to achieve common goals, and (b) to develop practical suggestions to nurture and enhance the collaborative relationships that are increasingly required of principals and staffs as they address ever-more complex educational issues. In the present study, these issues are examined from within the domain of the "inner city school culture"; special attention is paid to the considerations which must be made by school staff working in this environment.

### *Relationship to Existing Research and Literature*

For almost three decades educational researchers have documented the isolation of the classroom faced by teachers (e.g., Lortie, 1975; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Little, 1987; Gresso & Robertson, 1992). For almost as long, various researchers have called for teachers to work collaboratively in small teams to "break the isolation of the classroom" (Little, 1987, p. 494).

The reported benefits of teachers working in small groups with colleagues do not come as a surprise. The literature is replete with examples of instructional support teams (e.g., Sgan & Clark, 1986), clinical supervision dyads (e.g., Grimmett & Crehan, 1990), site based decision making and management (Brown, 1994), shared decision making (e.g., Alvarez, 1992) and their advantages not only for the participants but also for their organizations.

Interestingly, collaboration may not necessarily be the panacea many think it is. As has been pointed out by Huberman (1993),

> Working together to accomplish the chief missions of the school is a desirable, even irresistible, objective. So desirable that we have to ask ourselves why so little of it appears to be going on at present and, when it has gone on, why it seems so difficult to sustain. (p. 12)

Little and McLaughlin (1993) caution researchers and practitioners that collaboration by itself does not necessarily result in practices that are good for children. Several studies, some going back almost two decades, have described highly supportive staff interactions which functioned at the expense of students (Hammersley, 1984; Woods, 1984; Bruckerhoff, 1991). This suggests the need to ensure that the collaborative relationships which are encouraged in schools are student focused.

The present study focused on staff perceptions of the process they engaged in which

emerged from the school principal's initiative to move the school culture in a more collaborative direction--the primary goal of which was to further develop pedagogical practice and student social and academic growth.

### *Method and Data Source*

This investigation made extensive use of semi-structured interviews with the school staff--a case study method was employed. Observational field notes were also collected during visits to the school by the researchers. Prior to conducting the interviews, two of the researchers were given a tour of the school and introduced to the staff and many of the students. The analyses of the interviews and observations were conducted through the use of narrative accounts to support emerging themes.

All staff at one inner city elementary school were asked to participate in the study--all the teachers, support staff, and the school principal volunteered. Semi-structured interviews, of 30 to 60 minutes duration, were conducted in two rounds approximately three months apart with each respondent during the 1997/98 school year. A total of 30 interviews were conducted with 15 participants. Dialogue during the interviews focused on the perceived changes that were being implemented at the school as a result of government, district, and school initiatives--particularly those initiatives having their genesis with the teachers themselves and with the principal herself. Essentially, the purposes of the interviews included: (a) to find out what this group of teachers "thought they were up to"; (b) how the changes had been experienced from the perspectives of the teachers, support staff, and the principal; and (c) what the instructional staff at the inner city school had perceived as the effects of their efforts.

## *The Context*

### *About the School*

***Demographic background.*** Buena Elementary School (a pseudonym) caters to slightly under 200 pupils of various ethnic backgrounds in Kindergarten to grade six and is located in the inner city area of a large Western Canadian metropolitan area. Relative to other schools in the district, Buena Elementary o serves a high socio-economic needs community. Fifty-three percent of households sending children to Buena Elementary School earned less than $15,000 in 1991 (the most recent economic data collected by the District). Almost half of the students attending Buena Elementary School have special needs designations. The demographic profile of the local community shows high proportions of single adult households and single males. Many individuals and families living in the school's catchment area are transient resulting in a high turn-over rate of the student population at Buena Elementary--ranging from 20% to 30% in any given year.

In the past, the school has had a community development emphasis as its mandate. Due to diminished resources and the arrival of the current principal in the Fall of 1996, the school is now emphasising literacy and numeracy. In the Fall of 1997, Buena Elementary School was invited to become a participant in the District's "Quantum Leap Project." This project gave the staff at Buena Vista Elementary carte blanche to improve student achievement in any ways they saw fit; there was only one caveat, the school was not given any additional funding.

***Partnerships with the community***. The school has longstanding partnerships with the local Masonic Lodge and Rotary Club. New partnerships have been established within the last two years with several local businesses and the United Way. These partnerships not only infuse money into the school but also provide volunteers to work with the children at the school. Buena

Elementary School also has a "study-buddy" program established with the Department of Elementary Education at a local university. A snack program and a hot lunch program are available to all students attending Buena Elementary school. Student clothing needs are met through a winter clothing drive undertaken by the school council members of a local junior high school which has partnered with Buena Elementary School and by a clothing bank operated by the Buena Community Centre. In order to teach students the importance of being good members of the community, all students are involved in community service projects in which *they* give back to their community.

***Organisational structure***. The school was organised such that the Kindergarten class has a full-time program aid and grades 1 to 6 each have half-time resource teachers who use a "pull-out" model to work with students experiencing difficulties. The school also had a full-time teacher who managed the school library and was responsible for computer technology in the facility. A teacher, funded by the United Way, had been hired to work in the school to coordinate a community mentorship program focused on increasing student achievement in language arts and mathematics. The goal of the program was to have a mentor for each child in the school by the year 2000--these mentors were expected to work with pupils once per week in the school. An intern teacher was also hired to work in the school. The intern is assigned to two teachers per month and was responsible for working with children in the master teachers' classrooms--specific instructional arrangements were negotiated between the intern and the individual regular classroom teachers. Starting with the 1997/98 school year, the timetable at Buena Elementary school was re-arranged so that all teachers would have an extra 30 minutes of preparation and organisational time on Thursday afternoons after children were dismissed. This time was divided

equally between staff meetings and professional development activities.

All staff at Buena Elementary School were also expected to coordinate at least one student club or sport at all times throughout the school year. The principal, Jane (a pseudonym), believed that it was healthy for staff and students to see each other engaging in activities which were different and removed from the classroom.

***About the Initiative***

***Emphasis on literacy and numeracy for pupils.*** The emphasis on literacy and numeracy was also evident in the programs that students were involved in. Buena Elementary School students were all part of a home reading program. Basal readers from another school, which were about to be discarded, were obtained, cut apart and rebound into individual stories. Students now had access to these reading materials in addition to the books that are available in the school library. Students experiencing difficulty with reading also participated in a "Reading Recovery Program." Numeracy was emphasised at the school by ensuring that teachers had mathematics manipulatives available for student use to reinforce their abstract learnings. Students also had computer hardware and software available in their own classrooms as well as in the school library to supplement the language arts and mathematics curricula.

***Staff professional development***. Staff were organised in two primary ways for formal professional development activities originating in the school. First, staff were arranged into three working groups--referred to as "triads" but consisting of four and in some cases five individuals--each spanning three grade levels. Second, staff were also arranged into study groups such that members from each triad were each in a different study group. The purposes of the triads were to address pedagogical issues related to the specific students taught by the members of each triad

and to develop multi-age grouping themes based on language arts or mathematics for their cluster of grades. The purpose of the study groups was to review current research on teaching and learning. A portion of all staff meetings was also devoted to discussion of learning strategies and implications of current research for teaching. In keeping with this emphasis, yearly teacher professional growth plans were required to include specific goals related to achievement in literacy and in numeracy. Staff were also encouraged, with coverage provided by substitute teachers, to visit other teachers both within and without the school and to attend district inservice activities to obtain new ideas for their own professional development. All staff were formally evaluated by the principal during the 1996/97 school year. During the 1997/98 school year, only new staff and those "in difficulty" were formally evaluated. Those staff members not being formally evaluated in the current school year were expected to engage in critical self-appraisal practices, peer supervision, or the development of a reflective professional teaching portfolio.

***The principal***. Jane, the principal of Buena Elementary School since the Fall of 1996 utilised a leadership approach which could best be described as demanding of excellence and hard work--but not any more demanding than she was of herself. In her interactions with the school staff, she regularly acknowledged and thanked them for any contributions regardless of how minimal. This manifested itself in public as well as private ways. Jane was very clear regarding what she saw as the purpose of education and of schools: the mandate was for literacy and numeracy. In achieving this goal, Jane was guided by the belief that everyone she dealt with was to be treated with dignity regardless of the appropriateness of the choices they had made. Jane continuously reminded children--as she walked around the school before, during, and after school--to think before acting. She typically did this by addressing them by name and then asking "Have

you made a good choice today?" After the child responded, Jane typically gave the child a hug which was genuinely reciprocated. Jane kept herself informed of school activities by regularly walking through the halls and "popping" into classrooms--classrooms typically had an "open door" policy. Jane was described by many staff members as fair, kind, principled, and tough; she knew what she wanted and the majority of her staff and pupils responded positively. As one teacher said "I work harder for her than anyone else I know, and I love it."

### *Analysis*

Since this study is "a work in progress," the analyses of the data are not yet complete and the results offered presently are tentative and incomplete. In fact, even when the analyses are complete, the results offered will need to be viewed cautiously because of the unique nature of the site and the respondents engaged in this study. Six findings have emerged from the data analysed to date. These centre on the: (a) devolution of decision-making power to the school-site; (b) leadership style of the principal; (c) the role of personal friendships in work-focused groups; (d) administrative support for teacher professional development; (e) need to develop, *as a staff*, a shared vision statement; and (f) variety of social and academic learning opportunities being provided to students.

Given the present emphasis on devolving decision making to the school level in the province of Alberta, the teachers interviewed believed that, as a group, they had more control over how they deliver the provincially mandated curricula to their students. This power to make decisions locally--individually and in the triad groups--allowed teachers to tailor programs offered to better suit the needs of their students. This was particularly important at this inner city school because of the high proportion of students with special needs designations. Teachers did not have

any flexibility regarding curriculum; their mandate, as passed down from the provincial Department of Education, was to deliver the provincial curriculum appropriate to the grade levels being taught.

The leadership style of the principal was seen to be critical by both teachers and the principal herself in shaping the school culture. The majority of the staff agreed with the vision Jane had for the school. In terms of decision-making responsibility, staff seemed to agree that there were at least three types of decisions that were made at the school, those that: (a) Jane made without input from staff (e.g., disciplining students, participating in the Quantum Leap Project), (b) Jane made after consulting with staff (e.g., school budget and staff assignments), and (c) were delegated to individuals or groups of individuals--the results of which were reported back to Jane only as a courtesy to keep her informed (e.g., triad group directions, individual decisions regarding how to pursue professional development for the year). Ultimately, Jane was the instructional leader of Buena Elementary School, as such she was charged with the responsibility of ensuring that pupils at the school received the best possible education. Jane's approach regarding which decisions were hers, which she wanted input on, and which she would delegate was appreciated by many of her staff, however, some staff perceived that their input was token on some issues.

For teachers working in teams, those triad groups that unanimously described themselves as having personal friendships with the other members of their triad appeared to work together most effectively. The group members in these triads reported that they enjoyed their colleagues' "valuable" feedback and did not mind meeting at times that were in addition to the Thursday afternoon times. Those triad members that did not report having personal friendships with other

members did participate in their triads' group activities. Their perceptions, however, of the pedagogical value of the triad group activities and discussions were not as enthusiastic. It is noteworthy that although teachers saw value in having work-focused discussions with colleagues and in planning with colleagues, only the intern-teacher was regularly involved in delivering curricula to pupils in ways that involved collaborating and co-ordinating teaching within the individual classrooms.

Administrative support for teacher professional development was crucial at this inner city school. Because of the devolution of decision-making to the school level, the principal--with the support of her staff--was able to slightly lengthen the school day. The additional time was then used to provide staff with one afternoon per week during which teachers could focus on pedagogical issues. Staff were unanimous in their views that support from the principal was crucial in terms of (a) providing fiscal resources to teachers for participation in professional development activities requiring release time from the classroom (e.g., observing in colleagues' classrooms, participating in district professional development activities), (b) providing fiscal resources to acquire classroom manipulatives, and (c) acting as a "gate keeper" to bear the brunt of community disapproval for the school implementation controversial decisions (e.g., early Thursday afternoon dismissal).

There was not unanimous agreement that the focus of the school should have shifted from being community based to being based on literacy and numeracy achievement. The argument posed suggested that the community focus allowed the school to take care of the basic needs of the "whole child" first. Once these were taken care of, then teachers were in a position to be able to address children's literacy and numeracy needs. Related to this ideological shift was the

perception by most of the staff, including the principal, that there is a need to develop a shared vision statement for the school.

Finally, Buena Elementary School was a very busy place for students, staff, and the principal. In addition to the traditional classroom environment, students had additional avenues to enable them to be successful in their learning of language arts and mathematics, as well as, in their social learning. This was apparent through observation of the variety of student directed activities taking place in the school on a daily basis. Considerable staff effort was demonstrated through the variety of extracurricular activities that they coordinated. Those staff members that seemed to "connect" with the principal, however, indicated that although they were self-motivated and hardworking, they "work[ed] even harder for Jane" than they ever had for anyone else. Those that did not appear to "connect" as much with Jane at times disagreed with her staff reinforcement and queried whether her motivations were truly child-centred.

### *Discussion*

To help explain and understand what is happening at Buena Elementary School, we will draw on Huberman's (1993) metaphor of the teacher as artisan. His metaphor was elaborate enough to capture the various nuances of the data and clear enough to provide both explanatory and predictive potential to our analyses. Huberman (1993) best describes this image when he says:

> It envisions the teacher as creating or repairing learning activities of different kinds with a distinctive style or signature. He or she adapts on the spot the instructional materials that have been bought, given, or scavenged, as a function of the time of day, the degree of pupil attentiveness, the peculiar skill deficiency emerging in the course of the activity, the little unexpected breakthrough on a grammatical rule, and the apparent illogic to children of mathematical bases other than 10. In doing this, the teacher relies heavily on concrete bits of practice that have proved successful in the past but that must be reconfigured as a function of the specific situation in the classroom, in order to make them work. (p. 15)

This suggests that even though a lesson can be carefully planned, the particular makeup of the students and their predispositions on the day of the lesson dictate that the teacher quickly and accurately assess and adapt the teaching process using materials and skills which are readily available to engage pupils in ways that enable them to make sense of the lesson content. In terms of pedagogical theory, education is still in its infancy making it highly complex and unstable. The tasks in which teachers are expected to engage are interactive to extremes not commonly experienced in other professions. The complexity and lack of stability in the educational process demand that teachers respond in idiosyncratic ways to idiosyncratic situations involving idiosyncratic individuals. Hence, from a professional and altruistic perspective, the need to be able to tailor the method of curriculum delivery to suit the needs of the individual teachers and their pupils can be argued.

If one thinks of teaching as an individualized process drawing on teacher expertise gained through literally thousands of miniscule ad hoc experiments and experiences to shape an individual's teaching schema, it is easy to see how one teacher's response set to a teaching situation could be in direct conflict to another teacher's response set to the same situation. Huberman (1993) takes the perspective that "the more interactive and responsive the instructional setting, the less likely it can be managed simultaneously by more than one adult of the same status" (p. 18). Due to this, Huberman (1993) claims that ". . . there are probably some rapidly reached limits to instructional collaboration . . . unless tasks or pupils are partitioned or unless there is a mutually ratified status hierarchy between collaborating teachers" (p. 18). At Buena Elementary School, the sharing of actual classroom teaching on a regular and planned basis appeared to be between the intern teacher and the various master teachers to whom she was

assigned. The extent of her teaching in each of the master teachers' classrooms varied from one room to the next as these were negotiated on a one-to-one basis.

Considering how interactive and responsive the classroom settings at Buena Elementary School were, it is not surprising that staff collaboration would be limited to planning classroom activities. Closely examining the triad group that perceived itself to be very successful in its collaboration reveals that although these people plan together and share ideas, their collaboration tends to stop there. Successful collaboration, then, is more likely to have to do with (a) coordination of planning for classes, (b) reviewing student work jointly, and (c) exchanging of classes to capitalize on teacher expertise or interest. In the final analysis, staff choosing to participate do so because of a perception that as individuals they have gained something that would be lacking without the input of colleagues. This is neither good nor bad, this collaboration reflects how staff choose to work together and it describes the circumstances under which staff will want to continue to collaborate. In order for this collaboration to be in the, it must have the best interests of pupils at its centre. Given Huberman's discussion of the teacher as artisan and the fact that ultimately what happens in a teacher's classroom is that person's responsibility, it is reasonable to expect staff to want collaboration to stop at coordination, review of student work, and exchanging of classes. This is not unlike the sort of collaborative workgroup that any principal would find useful for his or her decision-making at the school level.

Almost a quarter century ago, Lortie (1975) found that teachers tended to select others with whom to work on the basis of friendship rather than on the basis of rational division of labour within the school. It is not surprising then, that at Buena Elementary, those triad groups describing themselves as working very well together were also the ones in which the group

members described themselves as having friendships with the other members of the triad group. From an administrative perspective, the question of interest then becomes: "how can friendships be nurtured so that student focused collaborative work-teams can function in the school?" Hargreaves (1989) argued that collaborative relationships are predicated in

> . . . the small gestures, jokes and glances that signal sympathy and understanding; in kind words and personal interest shown in corridors or outside classroom doors; in birthdays, treatdays and other little ceremonies; in the acceptance and intermixture of personal lives with professional ones; in overt praise, recognition and gratitude; and in sharing and discussion of ideas and resources. (p. 14)

Without this sort of social culture in place it is unrealistic to expect staff to want to work together on pedagogically focussed issues. The initial steps for building of this type of culture in a school take much time. Nias (1989) argued that the rejoicing, grieving, provision of fellowship, and sharing of rituals emerging from the school's mission statement are critical for teachers to be able to work together. This is due to the development of tolerance and solidarity for one another often resulting in the formation of friendships. Tolerance, solidarity, and friendship, it is argued, makes intrusion into each others' instructional space more tolerable from the perspective of the person whose space is being intruded upon. Drawing on Nias's arguments, it seems that at Buena Elementary School one of the critical building blocks which was absent for the development of a collaborative work culture was the lack of a shared vision statement--one representing the philosophical beliefs held by the "loudest extravert" on staff through to the beliefs held by the "quietest introvert." This philosophical statement could serve to direct staff in (a) guiding their collaborative activities to benefit pupils and (b) interacting with one-another with tolerance.

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